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Brief Communication:

**A reassessment of the dates and translator attributions of
the *Laoniüren jing* 老女人經 (T559) and the *Laomu jing* 老母經 (T561)**

The Chinese Buddhist canon contains three versions of a short Mahāyāna scripture whose Sanskrit title, according to the transcription given in the Tibetan canon, is *Mahallikā-paripṛcchā-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra*.¹ The content of the sūtra, in brief, is the following: an aged and impoverished woman comes to see the Buddha, and in the ensuing question-and-answer exchange it becomes clear that she has deep insight into the Dharma. Ānanda asks the Buddha to explain why this woman is so wise, on the one hand, but so poor on the other, and the Buddha replies that in a former life she had been his (i.e., the bodhisattva's) mother—hence her wisdom—but when he wanted to leave home to become a *śramaṇa* she prevented him from doing so, hence her poverty. As a result of impeding his ascetic vocation, she suffered from poverty for the next five hundred lives.² Now, however, when she dies she will be reborn in the realm of Amitābha,³ and after sixty-eight (var. sixty) *koṭis* of *kalpas* have passed, she herself will attain buddhahood.⁴ Though the sūtra is extremely brief—comprising less than a full page in each of its three Chinese translations—it seems to have enjoyed some currency, for it is cited by name in at least two commentaries, one composed in India and the other in China.⁵

¹ Tib. 'Phags pa bges mos zhus pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo; see Peking/Ōtani no. 838, Derge/Tōhoku no. 171, Stog Palace no. 199. The Sanskrit transcriptions of sūtra titles given in the Tibetan canon should not, however—without independent confirmation—be taken as solid evidence that these titles actually existed in India. When Buddhist scriptures were first translated into Tibetan the Sanskrit titles were not recorded (see Marcelle Lalou, "Les textes bouddhiques au temps du roi Khri-sron-lde-bcan," *Journal Asiatique*, vol. 241 [1953], pp. 313-353), and many of the Sanskrit titles now given in the Tibetan canon are later reconstructions back-translated from the Tibetan titles themselves, sometimes (especially in the case of scriptures from the *Ratnakūṭa* section) with additional input from the Chinese.

² The Tibetan version, which represents a more developed recension of the sūtra, has a slightly different plot, according to which the old woman had been the bodhisattva's mother in five hundred lives.

³ This sūtra offers a good example of what Gregory Schopen has referred to as the role of Sukhāvati as a "generalized religious goal" in Buddhist texts whose primary focus is not on Amitābha; see Schopen, "Sukhāvati as a Generalized Religious Goal in Sanskrit Mahāyāna Sūtra Literature," *Indo-Iranian Journal*, vol. 19 (1977), pp. 177-210.

⁴ A recent discussion of this sūtra can be found in Hubert Durt, "Kajaṅgalā, who could have been the last mother of the Buddha," *Journal of the International College for Advanced Buddhist Studies* (Tokyo), vol. 9 (2005), pp. 65-87, especially pp. 68-70.

⁵ See the *Ru dasheng lun* 入大乘論, a Chinese translation of an Indian treatise attributed to *Sāramati, where the scripture is quoted twice (T1634, 32.40a25ff. and 40a28ff.), and the *Yinchi ru jing zhu* 陰持入經註, a commentary on An Shigao's *Yinchi ru jing* 陰持入經 (T603) composed in China in the mid-to late third century CE, where it is quoted once (T1694, 33.10b24-25). On the date and authorship of the *Yinchi ru jing zhu* see Stefano Zacchetti, "Some Remarks on the Authorship and Chronology of the *Yinchi ru jing zhu* 陰持入經注 T1694: The Second Phase in the Development of Chinese Buddhist Exegetical

In accordance with their usual practice of listing multiple translations of a single text in chronological order,⁶ the editors of the *Taishō* canon have arranged these three versions according to their presumed translation dates: first the *Laonüren jing* 老女人經 (T559), which is assigned to Zhi Qian 支謙 (fl. 220-252), followed by the *Laomunü liu ying jing* 老母女六英經 (T560) credited to Guṇabhadra 求那跋陀羅 (394-468, active in translation work from 435-443), and finally the *Laomu jing* 老母經 (T561), listed as anonymous but assigned to the Liu-Song 劉宋 period (420-479 CE). This largely conforms to what is found in the *Chu sanzang jiji* 出三藏記集, though only the first and last are mentioned there; Guṇabhadra is first credited with such a work of a similar title only about a century later.⁷

Of these, the *Laomunü liu ying jing* (T560) was clearly based on a different recension of the text than the other two; moreover, with the exception of one proper name,⁸ its wording bears almost no resemblance to that of the others. It seems certain, therefore, that it was produced without reference to either the *Laonüren jing* (T559) or the *Laomu jing* (T561). The latter two texts, however, resemble one another so closely (not only in their content, but also in the virtually identical wording used in many passages) that it is clear that they are not two independent translations. Rather, one must be dependent on—i.e., a revision of—the other. If the attributions given in the *Taishō* canon were correct, the anonymous *Laomu jing*, produced in the fifth century CE, should be a revision of Zhi Qian's third-century *Laonüren jing*.

A close look at the vocabulary and style of the two texts, however, casts doubt on this scenario. First, T561 shares with T559 a generally archaic style, beginning with the opening formula of *wen rushi* 聞如是 “Thus have [I] heard,” a rendition that was standard in translations produced prior to the time of Kumārajīva but seems to have quickly been superseded by the expanded translation *rushì wō wén* 如是我聞 after that time. Second, it uses a number of terms that are characteristic of translations produced during the second and third centuries CE but later went out of use, e.g., 痛痒 for *vedanā* “sensation,” 鬼神 for *yakṣa*, the transcription 阿須倫 for *asura* (later texts use -羅 in place of -倫), 天中天 Literature,” forthcoming in Mauro Maggi and Silvio Vita (eds.), *Buddhist Asia 2. Papers from the Second Conference of Buddhist Studies Held in Naples in June 2004* (Università di Napoli “L'Orientale”. Centro di Studi sul Buddhismo), Italian School of East Asian Studies, Kyoto.

⁶ The very few instances in which this principle is deliberately violated—e.g., when Kumārajīva's *Lotus Sūtra* (T262, 妙法蓮華經) is placed prior to that of his predecessor Dharmarakṣa (T263, 正法華經), or where the version of the *Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha* (wrongly) attributed to Saṅghavarman (T360, 無量壽經) is placed before two texts that are clearly its predecessors (T361, 無量清淨平等覺經 and T362, 阿彌陀三耶三佛薩樓佛檀過度人道經)—show that, in these instances, powerful competing considerations (i.e., reverence for a particular translation) were at work.

⁷ See the *Zhongjing mulu* 眾經目錄 (T2147, compiled by Yancong 彥琮 in 610 CE), 55.157a7, where the text is called 老母六英經. Sengyou credits the *Laonüren jing* to Zhi Qian (T2145, 55.7a9) and lists the *Laomu jing* is listed as “anonymous” (with no indication of its date; see 55.27a11). No text entitled *Laomunü liu ying jing* (or *Laomu liu ying jing*) is registered by Sengyou.

⁸ The sole exception is the name of one of the Buddhas of the past, Krakucchanda, whose name is transcribed as *Julouqin* 拘樓秦 in both T560 (14.912c7-8, var. *Juliugin* 拘留秦) and T561 (913b1); in T559 has *Juliugin* 拘留秦 (912b5). This name was already well established, however, by the fifth century; it appears (in both of these forms) in a number of texts translated by Dharmarakṣa (Zhu Fahu 竺法護, fl. 265-309), for example, including his widely circulated *Lotus Sūtra* (T263, 9.100a05). Thus there is no reason to posit a direct connection between T560 and either T559 or T561 in order to explain its use of this term.

for *bhagavat*, and 發菩薩意 for *bodhicittotpāda*. Most of these terms appear here and there in later translations, and it would certainly not be impossible for a fifth-century translator to use some of these expressions. But the sheer quantity of such archaisms in T561 suggests that it may be older than its supposed Liu-Song date.

A comparison of T561 with T559, however—that is, with the *Laoniüren jing* attributed to Zhi Qian—shows that the latter text exhibits even more archaic vocabulary. In the list of the five skandhas, for example, T559 uses 生死 for *saṃskārāḥ*, while T561 has the more “modern” form 行; likewise T559 uses *nīli* 泥犁 (an archaic transcription which first appears in the translations of Lokakṣema) for *niraya* “hell,” whereas T561 translates the term as 地獄 “earth prison.” It seems highly unlikely that a reviser would change 行 to 生死 in this context, or 地獄 to 泥犁, though the reverse is easy to envision.

Third, we can observe a stylistic difference in these two texts: T561 sometimes abbreviates where T559 spells out traditional lists in full. For example, when T561 states in summary fashion that birth, old age, sickness, and death (生老病死) do not come from anywhere and do not go anywhere (無所從來去亦無所至), in T559 this statement is repeated four times, once for each of these items.⁹ Conversely, in a few places T561 contains material not found in T559, apparently consisting of commentarial glosses or statements added for emphasis.¹⁰ Here, too, it seems unlikely that a revisor would delete material found in T561, while conversely the phenomenon of abbreviating the treatment of standard lists is well known. Once again, the evidence points toward the identity of T561 as a revision of T559.

But the question of the respective dates and translator attributions of these two texts still remains. Here a comparison not just of Buddhist technical terms, but of ordinary expressions as well, is illuminating. Much of the vocabulary found in T561 matches that of T559 exactly; for purposes of determining their respective dates, however, it is the differences that are most important. The following table gives a representative list of expressions found in T559 which differ from the corresponding wording used in T561, together with an indication of whether the expressions in question do (○) or do not (x) occur elsewhere in Zhi Qian’s corpus.

T559	ZQ	T561	ZQ
發意學道	x	發菩薩意	○
不肯聽(我去)	x	不聽(我作沙門)	○
因是故	x	以是故	○
鬼神龍天人 ¹¹	x	天龍鬼神	○
老女人	x	老母	○

Of these the last is the most telling, for though the terms *lao* 老 “old” and *nüren* 女人 “woman” occur many times in Zhi Qian’s corpus, there is no text reliably attributed to him in which these two expressions occur together. On the contrary, whenever his texts

⁹ See T561, 14. 913a1-2 and T559, 14.912a5-7, respectively.

¹⁰ For example, where T559 has simply 我欲作沙門 (912b5), T561 adds an explicit reference to the bodhisattva path: 我為菩薩道。意欲作沙門 (913b1-2). In a second case, following a discussion of emptiness T559 states only 萬物亦爾 (14.912a21), while T561 expands this statement and adds an additional one: 諸所有萬物一切亦如是。我人壽命亦如是。 (913a15-16).

¹¹ The terms 鬼神, 龍, and 天人 appear individually in Zhi Qian’s work but never in this order.

refer to an “old woman” he uses the term *laomu* 老母 instead. The latter, of course, is precisely the terminology found in the *Laomu jing* (T561)—not merely in the title, but throughout the text itself.¹²

A small piece of corroborating evidence can be found in the *Yinchiru jing zhu* 陰持入經註 (T1694), which contains a citation from the *Laomu jing* 老母經. In addition to the fact that the title agrees with that of T561 (and not T559), the wording of the quotation also matches that of T561.¹³ Though there are a few exceptions, the *Yinchiru jing zhu* draws the overwhelming majority of its scriptural references from the works of just two translators: An Shigao 安世高 (fl. 148-170) and Zhi Qian. This evidence harmonizes well, therefore, with the above data showing that T561 (and not T559) contains the vocabulary used by Zhi Qian.

The fact that, where T559 and T561 differ, it is the terminology of T561 that is consistent with that of Zhi Qian makes it clear that the attributions given in the *Taishō* edition of the canon are incorrect. Instead, it is T561 that should be assigned to Zhi Qian, while T559 should be listed as anonymous. But as we have seen, the vocabulary of T559 is even more archaic than that of T561, and other factors—the fact that T561 abbreviates certain repetitive passages found in T559, while apparently adding an occasional interpretive gloss—support the idea that T561 is a revision of T559. This implies, in turn, that T559 must be even older than Zhi Qian’s version, which was produced no later than the middle of the third century CE. Thus T559 can now be added to the roster of the very earliest Chinese Buddhist translations: those produced during, or very shortly after, the Eastern Han 東漢.

As to the *Laomunü liu ying jing* 老母女六英經 (T560), its terminology is clearly more recent than that of the two versions discussed here, and pending further investigation by specialists in his corpus, the traditional attribution to Guṇabhadra may provisionally be retained. Thus the correct chronological sequence of these texts should be emended to T559 (anonymous, dating from the late Han or very early Three Kingdoms period) → T561 (translated by Zhi Qian in the first half of the third century CE) → T560 (translated c. fifth century CE, perhaps by Guṇabhadra).

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key words: *Laonüren jing*, *Laomu jing*, *Laomunü liu ying jing*, Zhi Qian

¹² It is not always the case that the terminology found in a sūtra title occurs within the body of the text itself. Titles appear to have been almost as fluid in China as they were in India, and unless the terms used in the title reappear within the text itself, they should not be considered to belong to the translator’s own repertoire. A good example is the case of the *Da’aidao banniehuan jing* 大愛道般泥洹經 (T144), in which the name *Da’aidao* (a translation of Mahāprajāpati; see Seishi Karashima and Jan Nattier, “*Qiuluzi* 秋露子: An Early Chinese Name for Śāriputra,” *Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University for the Academic Year 2004* [ARIRIAB], vol. 8 (2005), p. 369) never appears, in contrast to the *Fomu banniehuan jing* 佛母般泥洹經 (T145), where the Buddha’s foster-mother is referred to many times by this name (*op. cit.*, pp. 363-364).

¹³ See T1694, 33.10b24-25: 老母經曰。眼見色即是意。意即是色。 The wording of T561 (913a10-11) and T559 (912a15-16) are nearly identical here, but—though the difference is a small one—T561 alone uses the word 眼, while T559 has 目 instead. (The main text of T561 given in the *Taishō* canon reads 眼見好色, but the character *hao* 好 is absent in several editions [see n. 3] and seems likely—based on its common usage in this context elsewhere—to be the result of a scribal emendation.)